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A FEW WORDS

ON

ART-EDUCATION:

ADDRESSED TO THE MEMBERS

OF THE

BARNSTAPLE

LITERARY & SCIENTIFIC INSTITUTION.

BY RICHARD W. COTTON.

VERUM ENIM VERO IS DEMUM MIHI VIVERE, ATQUE FRUI ANIMA VIDETUR;
QUI.....ARTIS BONA E FAMAM QUERIT.

SALLUST.

BARNSTAPLE:

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1854.



The Writer having assisted in the attempt that has already been made to bring the subject of ART-EDUCATION before the Members of the Barnstaple Literary and Scientific Institution, feels that he cannot do better than address to them, which he does with much respect, the following remarks. They have been written with the hope not only of inducing those of the Members who are likely most to profit by a knowledge of Art, to avail themselves of the facilities for acquiring that knowledge which the system of class-instruction (not the least interesting province of the Institution) adequately affords, but that, through the instrumentality of others, the value and importance of a detail of popular education, at present but little appreciated, may become familiarized to a more extended circle, and be ultimately recognised in all the educational establishments of the locality.

FEBRUARY, 1854.

ART - EDUCATION.

THE love of personal and household decoration—a foible or an instinct of humanity—has been conspicuous in every age; and the Arts which minister to it have, in every state of civilization, been esteemed and cultivated. Unlike the higher faculties of Painting and Sculpture, which, emanating from rare and exalted genius, are necessarily a privileged enjoyment of the few, the Decorative Arts, which give beauty of form and surface to the objects of ordinary association and use, are the result of an easily attainable amount of cultivated taste and skill, and constitute a natural and accessible source of gratification to the many. The development of DESIGN in ornament, does not, however, if we estimate it by our standard of taste, appear to have always corresponded with intellectual and social progress; although a remarkable unanimity of thought and feeling, unaided by any other influences, has not unfrequently raised it to the dignity which a distinct style of itself implies. We know that the exquisite ornamental art of Greece, was cotemporary with its intellectual grandeur, and that, in the glorious age of Italian refinement, the practice of decorative design was ennobled by the genius of the greatest artists of that or any other time; yet, in the great industrial contest which we have recently witnessed, the torpid civilization of Hindostan and of

an obscure African state has earned for their beautiful and characteristic productions, a first rank; while, on the other hand, congratulate ourselves as we may on our scientific achievements, on a wider spread intelligence and the more general diffusion of the comforts of life, our efforts in ornamental design, evincing little of indigenous merit and less of originality, have left us in a position as inexplicable as it is humiliating.* The fragile records of the vigorous decorative talent of the Etruscans have survived as evidences at least of their taste and elegance, when every trace of their literature has perished—it is the peculiarity of the Arts of decoration thus to reflect to other times the tone of thought and expression prevalent in their own; but it will be fatal to the prominence of our own age and nation, in the page of history, if no other evidence of their intellectual refinement float down the stream of time than the relics of their domestic handiwork.

“Foreigners observe”—so wrote Goldsmith a century ago,—“that there are no ladies in the world more beautiful or more ill-dressed than those of England. Our country-women have been compared to those pictures, where the face is the work of a Raphael, but the draperies thrown out by some empty pretender, destitute of taste and entirely unacquainted with design.” The criticism of the amiable author is gracefully and discreetly qualified; but its less flattering part touches a fault, not perhaps peculiar to his own time, and without doubt it might have been extended, with as much justice in his day as it would be in our own, to a far wider theme than that of female dress. To any one, indeed, whose business or humour had led him to give the least attention to

* Mr. Owen Jones has observed that “with all the artists of England with whom he was acquainted, as well as with foreign visitors, he had found but one opinion, viz., that the Indian and Tunisian articles were the most perfect in design of any that appeared in the Exhibition.”—*Lectures on the Results of the Great Exhibition.*

the subject there was no need of the evidence gathered by the Exhibition of 1851—that conspicuous “starting point from which all nations will be able to direct their further exertions”—to prove the poverty of taste in design, the scanty feeling for the beautiful, which characterizes the manufactured productions of this country; or to shew that our ingenuity has been exercised to little purpose if it has only made us successful copyists of the worst features of oriental art—of the forms of classic and mediæval works, when we have failed to invoke their spirit.

This is not advocacy of ornament for its own sake, nor let it be supposed that an insufficient exercise of the ornamental talent by any means constitutes the prevailing feature of the national workmanship. It may even be fearlessly asserted that it would be a positive gain if one half of the exclusively ornamental accessories in the country were altogether swept away,—it rather lies in the redundancy of a decoration which is regulated by no principles of taste, is destitute of simplicity, and often entails the entire sacrifice of sterling utility and constructive purpose: in a word, the decorative element has been loved, not wisely, but too well.* As, therefore, we find the influences of ornament generally predominant—and those whose æsthetic tendencies would lead them to repudiate it as a superfluity, are perhaps more under those influences than they are willing to admit—its worth and purity cannot be a matter of indifference, and its abuse becomes an evil seriously involving the stability and welfare of our industrial interests. The “Reports of

* “It is impossible,” says Mr. Redgrave in his *Report on Design*, “to examine the works of the Great Exhibition without seeing how often utility and construction are made secondary to decoration. . . . This, on the slightest examination will be found to be the leading error in the Exhibition, an error more or less apparent in every department of manufacture connected with ornament, which is apt to sicken us of decoration, and leads us to admire those objects of absolute utility (the machines and utensils of various kinds) where use is so paramount that ornament is repudiated, and fitness of purpose being the end sought a noble simplicity is the result.”

the Juries" bear significant testimony to this view of the case; "it is only," says one of them, "within comparatively a few years that the *national success in the market* has been generally even suspected to be endangered by want of taste."

On the eve of the Great Exhibition, a Committee of the House of Commons, on the then existing Schools of Design, had accumulated a mass of evidence on this subject, the importance of which cannot, I conceive, be gainsaid by the most rigid utilitarian: "it has proved that the English manufacturer still copies ornamental design much more than he originates it and that the foreign producer has a considerable advantage over him, not merely for a reputation for better taste in general, but for a knowledge of appropriate design in special manufactures, which even the superior make and cheapness on the side of the English manufacturer do not counterbalance; at the same time, the evidence goes to show that if English designs were as original and appropriate as foreign, English manufactures would be preferred almost universally."* The superiority of French designs is everywhere admitted, and manufacturers are shewn to resort systematically to France for the purpose of purchasing and copying them; the best of our metal ornamental designs are plagiarisms from the French; the best of our pottery designs are imitations of those of Dresden and Sevres; and the greater part of our ornamental glass, the best patterns for paper hangings, and all the superior designs for calico printing, are regularly imported from France. Whatever opinion may be entertained of the excellencies of the great magazine of taste, to which our manufacturers appear thus compelled to resort, to sustain their reputation—and one of the witnesses does not scruple to call it "detestable"—it cannot be doubted that enough has been adduced to prove that

* Mr. Milner Gibson's Report.

the native commodity is held in but indifferent estimation. Fashion may dictate a style of ornament but it can never influence its intrinsic quality : we are therefore reduced to the dilemma of supposing either that our own artistic designs are deficient in excellence, or that our tastes are so vitiated as to prefer an imported inferiority. Whichever supposition we adopt, it will, I think, be admitted, that a more extensive cultivation of practical art and a better appreciation of its economical value are wanting, not only to the satisfaction of our own requirements, but to the maintenance of the position which our productions, relying for pre-eminence, perhaps, too long on other qualifications, have hitherto held in the markets of the world.*

I am appealing, however, to an audience to whom these considerations, although undoubtedly of national moment, are not perhaps so obvious : but even within the range of their immediate experience are there no details of art-workmanship dependent on the adventitious aid of beauty of form and colouring, or skilful adaptation to purpose, for the value which they acquire ? Are there no workmen whose interests are involved in the observation and study which these qualities demand ? We talk complacently of the extended means of locomotion which we enjoy, of museums, exhibitions, and crystal palaces, to which we have increasing facility of access, but to how few does it occur that while these opportunities insensibly impart to the consumer a keener relish for what is beautiful in art, by bringing him into contact with the best productions of his own and every other age, the provincial artizan, wanting this means of improvement, gropes on in the faith and practice of his fathers, forfeiting more and more that countenance and support

* The mercantile value and industrial importance of mere ornament will be best illustrated by the fact that there are, in Paris alone, upwards of 8,000 persons engaged in the manufacture of ornamental bronzes—a branch of industry which scarcely existed thirty years ago.

which his untutored skill is incompetent to secure. But, as compensation, we are told, is the great principle of nature, so in this case a remedy, if not anticipated by more direct means, will perhaps ultimately be found in the innumerable processes by which the productions of the graphic arts are multiplied, and the brightest efforts of genius brought familiarly home to the comparison and study of the humblest designer. These observations are, of course, chiefly applicable to the case of the workman in the higher grades of ornamental art; but they are not without their force if extended to a lower and wider field of industry. As there is, in fact, no species of handicraft, however ordinary, which would not be improved by the application of artistic intelligence, so there is no artizan whose industrial efforts would not gain in commercial value in proportion to the amount of educated skill and refined feeling which they evince.* "Taste," it has been happily said, "is composed of Nature, improved by Art; of Feeling, tutored by Instruction." Wherefore in the designer, *par excellence*, this faculty should attain its full development—his is the purely intellectual part of production; but it is not less essential that its true principles, and the laws to which experience tends to prove that it is always amenable, should, at least in a rudimentary degree, be familiar to the workman who applies the taste of the designer to the object produced. By assisting him, therefore, to acquire a knowledge of those principles and laws, as a guide to his practice, you do not expect to create a Ghiberti or a Cellini, a Raphael or a Michael Angelo, but you seek to add at least some degree of skill and intelligence to manual ability, and

* "It has been too often imagined that the value of artistical knowledge was confined to designers and draughtsmen only, but perhaps it is equally if not more useful in forming superior workmen in all descriptions of handicraft, even in those apparently of the rudest and simplest kind. Readiness of hand, correctness of eye, and the power of detecting and avoiding what is in false taste, and an appreciation of the true and beautiful are not imparted in vain."—SOLLY. *Evidence before Parliamentary Committee.*

to clothe its material result with meaning and beauty. The ready interchange of ideas between employer and employed, which the simplest power of drawing facilitates, the inventive faculties which it fosters, and the truth and vigour which it imparts to the work, are not without their substantial and appreciable value. The superiority of the artizan who possesses this practical knowledge over the one who does not, is undeniable ; and “the intelligent workman who can invent”—as the eminent engineer, Mr. Brunel, has observed,—“will be paid more, and employed accordingly, like a clerk who writes a good hand as compared with one who writes a bad one.”*

Nor does the argument limit itself to the case of the mere operative : the tradesman has not only a vested, but an extremely sensitive interest in the ornamental qualities of his goods ; and he who provides for, and in some degree directs the taste of the public in decorated productions, should scarcely want a tutored and discriminative eye and some practical knowledge of art.

As an illustration of the prevalent inappreciation of the commonest principles of constructive art, I might, without irrelevancy to the subject of these remarks, point to familiar instances within our own observation of public buildings hopelessly dilapidated almost before they have left their builders’ hands. I allude more particularly to the Church of the Holy Trinity

* “Industrial instruction bids fair to be the mainspring of the improvement of mankind. We live in an age in which the mechanism of production has been perfected to a marvellous degree. From the simplest tool to the powerful vehicles which bound through space with miraculous velocity, every kind of machinery has been renovated over the surface of the globe, by the inspiration of science. Credit places capital more bountifully at the command of the workers. Laws and manners favour labour. Whilst everything thus changes to his advantage around the producer, he should himself be improved. Whilst all the instruments of production are being perfected, it is necessary that the foremost of all these instruments—man—should become more skilful.... To regard the question, however, in another point of view, worthy in the highest degree of the serious attention of statesmen, it may be said that the tendency of civilization is to constitute skill the only element of superiority in production.”—*Report to the Belgian Government on Industrial Instruction in England*, by the Chevalier de Cocquiel.

and the new Fish Market. If, in the one case, we are made sensible how much the best design depends for its realization upon manual dexterity and constructive fidelity, in the other we see all the vanity and miserable economy of architectural impropriety and insincerity and that indifference to the ordinary canons of true taste is not the fault exclusively of the workman. In both instances the eternal "Lamp of Truth" has been obscured.*

The establishment, in the year 1837, of a Central School of Design, followed by that of twenty-one others in the chief centres of manufacturing industry in the kingdom, was the first practical recognition by the Government of the policy, if not of the duty, of correcting the national indifferentism in matters of decorative art. The express object of these schools was to afford to manufacturers and artizans an opportunity of acquiring a competent knowledge of art, in so far as it is connected with their avocations, and to carry into effect a systematic course of instruction, which should embrace the theory and distinctive principles of ornamental art, to the end that the student might apply the skill and knowledge, so acquired, to the creation of designs for the various specialities of industrial production. It would, perhaps, have been too much to expect that the establishment of these schools was at once to revolutionize the national taste, and to originate a degree of excellence in the native arts of design that should, by its inherent vigour, discard the often meretricious influence of foreign taste from our manufactured productions; but we are scarcely prepared for the meagre result of the twelve years' operations of the schools which the Parliamentary enquiry, to which I have before referred, has elicited. It is true that the fifteen or sixteen thousand students, who in that period have passed through these institutions, cannot but have exercised a wholesome influence

* *Vide—Ruskin's Seven Lamps of Architecture.*

upon the operative population into which they have been absorbed—an influence which is perhaps only now beginning to be apparent—but of these the proportion of practical designers, the class which the schools were especially intended to produce, seems to have been extremely small, and manufacturers, even if they have had the inclination, do not appear to have had the strongest inducement to avail themselves of their abilities. There is a partial explanation of this result in the following passage from the Report of the Committee: “The teaching of ornamental art, necessarily pre-supposed the students having attained to a certain proficiency in *elementary* studies, and this proficiency few, if any, were found to have acquired, so that it has been necessary to impart it at the beginning of each man’s education. The demand for such teaching has been so great in proportion to the means which the schools possess of supplying it, that they have of necessity assumed more of the character of elementary institutions than was originally expected.” The inference is clear enough, that, even if all the resources and energies of these establishments had been continuously devoted to the cultivation of an effective talent for design, they would still have been inoperative in raising the character of our decorative arts, unless some means cotemporaneously existed of imparting to the artizans who apply them, and to the public whose opinion is the ultimate, though not always the best test of their success, a correct appreciation of their fundamental principles.

Impelled by these considerations, not less than by the unmistakable lessons which the Great Exhibition had dictated, the Board of Trade, early in the year 1852, by the formation of the Department of Practical Art, re-organized the whole system of Art-Education then existing in the country. The diffusion of a knowledge of elementary art among *all classes*, is the assumed basis of the operations of the Department.

It contemplates not only the immediate formation of independent schools and classes attached to public institutions, where the rudiments of art may be acquired, but the ultimate recognition of drawing as a necessary and indispensable branch of popular instruction. In these views the highest educational authority in the kingdom fully concurs: the Lords of the Committee of Council on Education, in a circular letter to the managers of the Training Schools, "emphatically record their opinion that the power of accurately delineating the forms of objects ought no longer to be regarded as an accomplishment only, or the result of some rare natural aptitude, but as an essential part of education." The Schools of Design, now styled Schools of Ornamental Art, are still maintained in the very seats of manufacturing industry to foster with their undivided resources the ability which may have been developed in the elementary schools, and to afford to advanced students the opportunity of perfecting themselves in the theory and practice of ornamentation.

At the same time that these means of promoting an extended knowledge and appreciation of decorative art are entrusted to local management and control, the central Department, at present occupying Marlborough House, combines with the institution of Classes for the more technical study of ornament, and its special adaptation to the various objects of workmanship and processes of construction, the opportunity of studying, in the museum of the Department examples of the best works of the best periods of the Art. The number of persons—nearly 12,000—who, in the inclement month of January last, passed through this museum, is a satisfactory proof that considerable public interest has been awakened; and, thanks to the admirable code of taste that has been promulgated by the Department, the creation of an entirely distinct national style of decoration—a style, let me venture

to predicate, equalling, if not exceeding, any that has preceded it in refined beauty—may not be the least probable result of this organized revolt against the mass of bad taste which has hitherto overflowed the country.

It will be remembered that the Committee of the Institution, recognizing the encouragement of elementary art-instruction as falling within the scope of the objects which it is their office to promote, issued an address, in the early part of the past year, expressing their readiness to organize a CENTRAL CLASS in connection with the Institution. The condition, however, on which this Class could alone be entitled to the valuable assistance which the Department of Practical Art is prepared to afford, was the co-operation of at least three public schools in the locality, in which the whole of the scholars should receive instruction in elementary art from the trained master, whom the Department would, in that case, appoint for their common benefit. It is matter for much regret that the attempt to enlist this co-operation has proved wholly abortive.* The Institution is therefore thrown upon its own resources; and I can imagine no task which its more influential members may more appropriately undertake than that of stimulating a desire for artistic improvement among the numerous artizans who resort, and who for that improvement may be induced to resort to it; nor a higher privilege than that of initiating, in their own field of usefulness, a system of popular education which must inevitably, sooner or later, become an indispensable part of our national scholastic routine.

If in the foregoing remarks I have dwelt more on the

*A circular letter, enclosing the address in question, was transmitted to the respective managers of sixteen public schools, within a radius of a dozen miles of Barnstaple. In not a single instance was even the receipt of this communication officially acknowledged. It should be stated that an annual payment of £5 was required from each school, in addition to the first outlay of about £7 for materials.

value of ornamental forms, and esteemed their culture more highly than the idiosyncracies of some of my readers may be inclined to approve of, let me not be supposed to advocate a system of instruction which has no other end in view. In every relation of life the mere faculty of drawing is eminently useful; and, even where it is not subservient to the due comprehension and practice of ornamental manipulation, its acquisition cannot be said to be an unnecessary part of the education of the workman, in whose practice the simplest processes of mechanical construction are involved. And, by this faculty, I do not mean the accomplishment familiar to polite life, but the power of delineating those simple linear and geometrical forms and combinations which are applicable to the special handiwork of the draughtsman.* I should be writing without a motive if I did not believe that there are many of those whom I am addressing who will be sufficiently sensible of the value of this knowledge, in their several occupations, to avail themselves readily of the opportunities of acquiring it, which the Committee of the Institution may be able to place within their reach, and for which indeed the Rules of the Institution entitle them to ask. It is true that, the stipulated conditions being unfulfilled, the advantages of a direct association with the Department of Practical Art must, for the present, be deferred; but, at the same time, the privilege of obtaining casts, models and examples, at a greatly reduced rate, by means of the Department, will not, I believe, be foregone. Under the tuition of a competent master, who will have the discrimination to unshackle himself from the trammels of an effete system, and to

* There seems to be no valid reason why drawing should not be taught as easily and as universally as writing. "When the arts were in their infancy," observes Sir Joshua Reynolds, in one of his lectures, "the power of merely drawing the likeness of any object was considered as one of its greatest efforts. The common people, ignorant of the principles of art, talk the same language even to this day. But when it was found that every man could be taught to do this, and a great deal more, merely by the observance of certain precepts, the name of Genius then shifted its application, &c."

adopt a course of instruction applicable to the practical requirements of his pupils,—and such an one, I confidently believe, will not be wanting to the occasion,—and with the auxiliary aid of occasional lectures on the history of Art and its styles, and the means of studying such works of acknowledged excellence as may be procured for that purpose, there is little doubt that a Class of Practical Art would be one of the most successful results of our admirable Institution. Nor need these opportunities be restricted to one sex. It has been somewhere remarked that dressing is a woman's art of architecture, and it must be confessed that the end gives importance to the means; but unhappily or happily, her sphere of industrial occupation is not so limited; and I know no means more likely to lead to the creation of fresh channels of profitable female employment, which appears to be one of the "*meliora*" for which the best spirits of the day are yearning, than the course of instruction now advocated.

At the outset, such a School of Art must of necessity be liberally subsidized; but, assuming that the remuneration of the master may be met by a trifling weekly payment from each student, I do not apprehend that an expenditure, on the part of the Institution, of more than £20 will be necessary for the provision of the requisite materials, in the first instance. As the number of students increased, and the value of the course of instruction became better known, I do not despair that the class would become self-supporting. The central school, recently established at Hereford, numbers nearly a hundred students, and it has all but attained this desirable position. The population of the city scarcely exceeds that of Barnstaple in number, and is much less engaged in mechanical occupations. But that an accurate estimate may be formed of the extent of the area in our own immediate locality over which the influences of Art, in their

most practical bearing, may be appropriately and profitably diffused, I will merely state that there are within the limits of the Borough at least 500 persons who, in their several pursuits, are more or less directly engaged in the application of art—whether it be elegance and propriety of form, elaboration of surface ornament, or harmonious arrangement of colours—to production.*

If I have said enough to suggest the inference that the artistic knowledge of the adult workman is extremely defective; that if the mason and carpenter had more tasteful feeling for their work we should see more of originality and individuality and life in the result, and less of the wearisome repetition of hackneyed forms; that if the cabinet maker and metal worker studied more closely the spirit of ornamental detail, we should have less of turgidity and sameness in their productions; that if the house-decorator appreciated more fully the laws of harmonious colouring we should be less frequently distressed by glaring improprieties; that if, in a word, the artizan of every class had a better theoretical knowledge of his art, his own and his employer's interests would be proportionately advanced—it will be evident that this knowledge, even in its most elementary form, cannot be diffused too generally, or at too youthful a period, amongst those whose avocations are likely even to be indirectly connected with the ordinary employments of daily life. The judiciousness, therefore, of the scheme of the

* This estimate must be taken only as an approximation, but if there be any error it is certainly not on the side of excess. It is derived from a computation of the number of masters, workmen, apprentices, and boys engaged in the following occupations,—viz. as builders, masons, carpenters, &c., 100: as cabinet makers, joiners, &c., 150; as smiths and metal-workers, 190; as painters, house-decorators, and others, 60. But this result will be considerably increased by the addition of those, who, although not directly concerned in art-workmanship, are, as it were, the purveyors of Art to the public—such as drapers, china and glass dealers, ironmongers, bookbinders, &c.—and who, if they fail to connect their own interest with the elevation and refinement of the public appetite for ornamental art, should at least take care that they do not degrade it by their own want of taste.

Department, which makes the introduction of Art into our public schools an indispensable accessory to the assistance given to adult classes, thus compelling a reaction of one on the other, is sufficiently obvious. The poverty, perhaps, and not the will of our local schools has debarred them from the advantages of this arrangement; but it may be suggested that, in the event of a class being formed in the Institution, the masters of these schools might be encouraged to acquire, by that means, a sufficient familiarity with Elementary Art to enable them to incorporate its teaching with their own scholastic duties. This suggestion is the more opportune as it is concurrent with a minute of the Committee of the Privy Council on Education, intimating that an exercise in Drawing will in future form part of the examination of teachers appointed to the schools under their inspection.

If the subject of these observations had no better tendency than that of administering to the caprices of the rich, or of gratifying the taste of the refined, what I have said would be the mere querulousness of dilettanteism—but I have not failed to insist on its thoroughly practical bearing. Even if the mercantile value of abstract ornament be disputed, and improved intelligence in Art be less conducive to elevation of character than I believe it to be, the immediate and tangible advantages resulting from the possession of refined and educated skill will at least, on the slightest reflection, be admitted by the artizan: and I feel assured that the facilities for acquiring that skill, which it has been my business to point out, will not be overlooked. There are, especially in these days, other qualities demanded from the operative besides those which are furnished by mere manual ability and physical power: “The philosopher,” says Dr. Johnson, “may very justly be delighted with the extent of his views, and the artificer with the readiness of his hands; but let



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the one remember, that without mechanical performances refined speculation is an empty dream, and the other, that without theoretical reasoning dexterity is little more than a brute instinct."

Barnstaple

R. W. Cotton.

Address on Art Education

*delivered by him at the
Literary Institution*